

Thank you, Creator, for all that is possible and your abundant gifts.
Thank you, Nature, for the forces that formed us and shape our reality.
Thank you, Science, for the path and the tools we use to explore and understand both nature and the divine.
Thank you, friends and fellow humans, for choosing to walk this path.

Welcome back, seekers.

In an earlier sermon I said that if there is a creator responsible for everything, then we should be able to find evidence everywhere. The Creator isn't hiding from us, which makes it exciting to add the methods and practice of science to our quest for the divine. It is important to remember, however, that observations are easy, while conclusions can be difficult.

So let me start with something curious that happened in 2009 at the Sea Star Aquarium in Coburg, Germany. It wasn't headline worthy yet opens an interesting portal into how we think about intelligence, consciousness, and what it means to recognize the divine in unexpected places.

For several sequential days, the aquarium staff would arrive in the morning to find that part of the electrical system had shorted out. Some sleuthing revealed that a 6-month-old octopus named Otto was the culprit. Otto had already demonstrated playful creativity and problem-solving and the aquarium staff had even trained Otto to aim and squirt water at visitors. During the winter closure, when the facility was quiet and stimulation was limited, Otto seemingly grew bored. For whatever reason, Otto discovered that he could climb to the tank's rim and shoot water into the overhead light until it shorted out. It looked an awful lot like mischief.

Now, alarm bells should immediately ring since boredom and mischief are human constructs that may be adding a false context. Our experiences and reactions are rooted in our physiology. Otto isn't a mammal; he's not even a vertebrate. His last common ancestor with us lived 600 million years ago. His neurons aren't concentrated in a single brain—two-thirds of them are distributed throughout his arms in 'mini brains'¹ that process semi-autonomously. Studies have shown that severed octopus arms can respond to stimuli an hour after being separated from the central brain, reaching, grasping, and reacting.² This doesn't mean that the arms *know* anything, but this certainly raises questions for any theory of mind.

So, was Otto bored, or did he just find the light irritating? Whatever the underlying motivation, Otto problem-solved, demonstrating intelligence. This behavior raises questions central to our spiritual practice. How do we recognize consciousness when it

¹ <https://www.nhm.ac.uk/discover/octopuses-keep-surprising-us-here-are-eight-examples-how.html>

² <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/severed-octopus-arms-have-a-mind-of-their-own-2403303/>

doesn't look like our own? Do we have a basis to ascribe motivation or state of mind in assessing behavior?

If we're seeking the Creator through the patterns revealed in nature, then we need to *see* those patterns, especially when they show up in places and forms we didn't expect. We must resist collapsing unfamiliar phenomena into familiar categories. We also need to understand how to *apply* what we see.

Otto's behavior compels us to ask: what is mind, intelligence, consciousness, and at what levels do we fold those others into our pursuit of the divine? For most of human history, consciousness seemed special and rare—possibly unique to humans, or at most shared with a few mammals. Everything else? They were relegated to the stimulus-response mechanisms we see in *all* living organisms, ones which require no inner life.

But here's where it gets interesting, suggesting a pathway for contemplation. The more we look in places beyond previous expectation, the more differing minds we seem to find.

Crows make tools, hold grudges across generations,³ and conduct what looks like funerals for their dead.⁴ African grey parrots use human language with semantic understanding,⁵ not just mimicry. Elephants recognize themselves in mirrors and mourn their dead with rituals. Whales exhibit fashion through cultural transmission of songs that change over time.⁶ And then there's the octopus, solitary, short-lived, with no language and no social structure, yet capable of play, deception, curiosity, and problem-solving.

All of this consciousness arises from completely different evolutionary pathways and different brain structures, providing different subjective experiences of the same shared reality. To make things stranger still, consider what has been revealed about plant communication. Plants have no brain, yet they use airborne chemicals, underground fungal networks, electrical signals, and possibly sound vibrations to share information about threats, resources, and kin. Is this a form of consciousness? No one can say. At the very least, plants are connected and communicating in functionally meaningful ways.

Nature demonstrates wide variation in its strategies, repeatedly solving similar problems through different means. So, if consciousness keeps emerging—in mammals, birds, cephalopods, and possibly plants—then consciousness starts to look less like an evolutionary accident and more like a *feature* of our reality. A pattern. An intention?

³ <https://www.discovermagazine.com/grudge-holding-crows-pass-on-their-anger-to-family-and-friends-360>

⁴ <https://www.iflscience.com/crows-hold-funerals-for-their-dead-but-the-service-can-get-weird-70596>

⁵ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11196360/>

⁶ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/whale-songs-undergo-cultural-revolutions-180970880/>

To ask what all of this means is a fascinating question that we currently have no way of answering. Is this the Creator's signature, written across the evolutionary tree? We can make observations but not conclusions, so the question becomes less important than understanding the impact of having the kind of consciousness that allows us to *ask in the first place*. If we turn to our tool of the Four Questions—what do we know, how do we know what we know, what does it mean, and how do we apply it—we can use the third question and ask, what does it mean that consciousness is woven through the creation? What shall we make of all these minds...?

Observations are easy; conclusions are not. Our tool of magnification, which I introduced in Sermon 5, reveals how things can be both true and false at the same time. No one would dispute that matter is solid. A simple experiment of trying to push your fingers through a tabletop can validate that hypothesis quite easily. Yet, at the atomic scale, that solid is revealed as mostly space, with fields and probabilities holding a pattern. As a general rule, the more complex the nature of the question, the more precise we must be about scale before reaching a conclusion. What feels absolute may be applicable only at one resolution.

In perceiving consciousness in other beings, how should we proceed? One could easily be led to the path of *ahimsa*, which is the ethical principle practiced in the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jainist traditions of not causing harm to other living things. Their practice is inspired by the premise that all living beings, including microscopic ones, have the spark of divine spiritual energy and require respect. They avoid violence because they believe that to hurt another being is to hurt oneself. How this practice is expressed varies among the traditions. Taken to a logical extreme, Jain ascetics sweep the ground in front of them as they walk to avoid injuring even minuscule forms of life.

I point out the Jain extreme because there is no consensus among practitioners of *ahimsa* as to its form, including the issue of eating meat, which some do. Even when an idea seems straightforward, there are always nuances, differing levels of perception, and a range of what science refers to as “phenotypic expression.” It is yet another reminder to remain malleable.

Observation isn't a call for ethical recalibration, it's an invitation to contemplate context. Nature is structured such that organisms eat other organisms, even at the microscopic level, where the paramecium eats the bacteria. Such is the pattern woven through 3.7 billion years of life on Earth. The octopus hunts the crab, the hawk snatches the mouse, the lion eats the gazelle, and humans eat plants and animals.

What our consciousness allows, and possibly demands, is that we add awareness as to *how* we participate in our shared reality and to understand the impact we exert. It is important to be cognizant of what we add to or remove from the experience of existence in other minds. Many indigenous cultures understood this, hunting with ceremony, gratitude, and minimal waste. They understood themselves as in relationship with their environment and what they consumed, a relationship that was sacred, not casual.

In our pursuit of the divine, we're seeking a still-undiscovered language. It's a wonderful thought experiment to consider what it's like to experience the world as "the other," whether that's a person, a dog, or an octopus. Remember, we view the patterns of creation through the keyhole of our limited perception. Seeing with other perspectives reveals more of the pattern, new wonders, and more of the amazing complexity in how things interconnect. If there is underlying intent, that, too, will get revealed.

If nature keeps expressing consciousness in endless forms—in creatures with no recent common ancestry, no shared neural structures, nothing in common but this mysterious capacity to experience, to know, and to *be*—then what is consciousness pointing toward? How do we participate in an unfolding that is greater than ourselves?

There is a common belief in many religions that God is within each of us, accessible through introspection, practice, or simple recognition. Christianity speaks of the Holy Spirit dwelling within; Hinduism teaches that *Atman* and *Brahman*—the self and the all—are one; Sufism says the divine is closer than your jugular vein. Each embodied consciousness, whether human, octopus, elephant, or crow, exists with different physiological abilities and perceptual thresholds. Each is a unique window into embodied experience. One could imagine that it is through these myriad perspectives that the Creator experiences the creation. If the divine isn't distant or external but is a part of our being, then perhaps *we* are the Creator's way of seeing Itself.

There is so much to learn, my friends. As we look towards the divine, we must lead with openness, compassion, and humility. At every level, the universe is revealed as intertwined in endless ways. The contented bacteria that occupy your microbiome have no sense of the being whose existence they support. Consider the possible level where *we* are the bacteria, serving purposes we can't perceive, supporting structures we don't comprehend, thinking ourselves central when we may be incidental.

Our pursuit of the divine requires that we walk a subtle path. As a society, we continue to be pushed into a digital, binary, easily parsed experience of reality that is draining us of nuance. True and false are not absolute when you change your level of resolution or perspective. So, let's try a practice this week of shifting. Let's try putting ourselves into another's shoes, or paws, or tentacles. Let's imagine what it would mean if there were a conversation between the trees. Let's consider the implication if everything in the creation is not only intentional but is in service to a single intention that starts in the mind of the divine. We are designed with the capacity for empathy and imagination. The artist at our core can envision far beyond our own experience.

Pay attention this week to other minds—not just human ones. When you see a bird, really look. When you encounter a dog, consider what it's like to experience the world through scent more than sight, to read emotion in postures we barely notice. Imagine the experience of being an octopus navigating by touch or a tree sensing the chemical distress signals of its neighbors through underground networks we can't perceive.

Ask yourself: What consciousness am I failing to recognize because it doesn't match my template? What frequencies of light, geomagnetic forces, tastes, and smells exist in the vast invisible realm just beyond my perceptual threshold?

These aren't just idle exercises in imagination. They're practice for recognizing the divine wherever it appears. If the Creator expresses Itself in all of these forms—each moving toward greater complexity, potential, and consciousness—then what does that mean for how we should move through the world? What does this recognition demand of us?

One practical implication is humility. If intelligence and awareness appear in forms radically different from our own, then resemblance to humanity is an insufficient standard for recognizing value or significance.

This also speaks to an unspoken responsibility. Humans are unique not because we alone possess awareness but because of our capacity to reflect on it, study it, and alter our behavior based on what we learn. We are participants in a reality that continues to be revealed as increasingly complex and alive with information and interconnection.

Each form of mind—or precursor to mind—is on its own path. We don't have to help, but we shouldn't hinder. And when we recognize what may be the divine pattern repeating across such wildly different expressions, it's also a call to remember that the Creator isn't hiding. We're still learning to see.

As seekers, our task is not to conclude what consciousness means, but to notice where it appears, how our assumptions limit our vision, and how expanding that vision might change how we live within the creation.

That, too, is part of the search.

This is malleability in action. This is releasing word-prisons. This is what it means to walk our path with eyes open to what was always there waiting to be recognized.

Once again, I give thanks for the gift of today with all that it entails.

Honor the Creator. Honor the creation.